

You Don't Have to Say You Love Me (Alexie)

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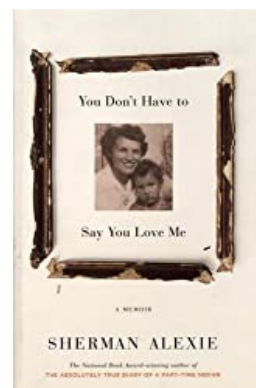
You Don't Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir

Sherman Alexie, 2017

Little, Brown and Co.

464 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780316270755



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Summary

A searing, deeply moving memoir about family, love, loss, and forgiveness from the critically acclaimed, bestselling National Book Award-winning author of The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian.

Family relationships are never simple. But Sherman Alexie's bond with his mother Lillian was more complex than most.

She plunged her family into chaos with a drinking habit, but shed her addiction when it was on the brink of costing her everything. She survived a violent past, but created an elaborate facade to hide the truth. She selflessly cared for strangers, but was often incapable of showering her children with the affection that they so desperately craved.

She wanted a better life for her son, but it was only by leaving her behind that he could hope to achieve it. It's these contradictions that made Lillian Alexie a beautiful, mercurial, abusive, intelligent, complicated, and very human woman.

When she passed away, the incongruities that defined his mother shook Sherman and his remembrance of her. Grappling with the haunting ghosts of the past in the wake of loss, he responded the only way he knew how: he wrote.

The result is a stunning memoir filled with raw, angry, funny, profane, tender memories of a childhood few can imagine, much less survive. An unflinching and unforgettable remembrance, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* is a powerful, deeply felt account of a complicated relationship. *(From the publisher.)*

Author Bio

- Birth—October 7, 1966
- Raised—Spokane, Washington, Indian Reservation
- Education—B.A., Washington State University
- Awards—National Book Award; PEN/Faulkner Award
- Currently—lives in Seattle, Washington

Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr. is an American poet, writer, and filmmaker. Much of his writing draws on his experiences as a Native American with ancestry of several tribes, growing up on the Spokane Indian Reservation. He lives in Seattle, Washington.

Childhood

Alexie was born in 1966 at Sacred Heart Hospital in Spokane, Washington, and spent his childhood on the Spokane Indian Reservation, located west of Spokane. His father, Sherman Joseph Alexie, was a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe (though a grandfather was of Russian descent). Alexie's mother, Lillian Agnes Cox, was of Colville, Choctaw, Spokane and European American ancestry.

Alexie was born with hydrocephalus, a condition that occurs when there is an abnormally large amount of cerebral fluid in the cranial cavity. He underwent brain surgery when he was only six months old and was not expected to survive or, if he did, would be at high risk of mental disabilities. Alexie's surgery was successful and he survived with no mental damage but had other effects.

His father was an alcoholic who often left the house for days at a time. To support her six children, Alexie's mother Lillian sewed quilts and worked as a clerk at the Wellpinit Trading Post.

Alexie has described his life at the reservation school as challenging because he was constantly teased by other kids. He was nicknamed "The Globe" because his head was larger than usual due to the hydrocephalus. Until the age of seven, Alexie suffered from seizures and bedwetting and had to take strong drugs to control them. Because of his health problems, he was excluded from many of the activities that are rites of passage for young Indian males. However, he excelled academically, reading everything available, including auto repair manuals.

Education

In order to better his education, Alexie decided to leave the reservation and attend high school in Reardan, Washington, 22 miles off the reservation. The only Native American student, he excelled at his studies, became a star player on the basketball team, and was elected class president. He was also a member of the debate team.

His success in high school won him a scholarship in 1985 to Gonzaga University, a Roman Catholic university in Spokane. Originally enrolling in the pre-med program, he found he was squeamish during dissection in his anatomy classes. He switched to law but found that unsuitable, as well. Feeling pressure to succeed and beset with anxiety, he began drinking.

In 1987 Alexie dropped out of Gonzaga and enrolled at Washington State University. He was at a low point in his life when he enrolled in a creative writing course taught by Alex Kuo, a respected poet of Chinese-American background. Kuo served as a mentor to Alexie and gave him *Songs of This Earth on Turtle's Back*, an anthology by Joseph Bruchac. It was a book, Alexie later said, that changed his life—teaching him "how to connect to non-Native literature in a new way." He remained similarly inspired, however, by Native American poets.

With his new appreciation of poetry, Alexie started work on his first collection, *The Business of Fancydancing: Stories and Viviane Poems*, published in 1992. With that success, Alexie stopped drinking and quit school just three credits short of a degree. Three years later, however, in 1995 he finally attained his bachelor's from Washington State University.

Short stories

Some of Alexie's best-known works are *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), a collection of short stories, and *Smoke Signals* (1998), a film based on that collection, for which he also wrote the screenplay.

His stories have been included in several anthologies, including *The Best American Short Stories 2004*, edited by Lorrie Moore; and *Pushcart Prize XXIX of the Small Presses*. Additionally, a number of his pieces have been published in various literary magazines and journals, as well as online publications.

His 2009 collection of short stories and poems, *War Dances*, won the 2010 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction.

Novels

Alexie's first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995), revisits some of the characters from *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. Thomas Builds-the-Fire, Victor Joseph, and Junior Polatkin, who have grown up together on the Spokane Indian reservation, were teenagers in the short story collection. In *Reservation Blues* they are now adult men in their thirties. The novel received one of the fifteen 1996 American Book Awards.

Indian Killer (1996) is a murder mystery set among Native American adults in contemporary Seattle, where the characters struggle with urban life, mental health, and the knowledge there is a serial killer on the loose.

The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian (2007) is a semi-autobiographical, coming-of-age story that began as a memoir of Alexie's life and family on the Spokane Indian reservation. The novel focuses on a fourteen-year-old Indian named Arnold Spirit and won the 2007 U.S. National Book Award for Young People's Literature. It also won the Odyssey Award as best 2008 audiobook for young people (read by the author himself).

Films

In 1998 Alexie broke barriers by creating the first all-Indian movie, *Smoke Signals*. Alexie based the screenplay on his short story collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, and characters and events from a number of Alexie's works make appearances in the film.

The Business of Fancydancing, written and directed by Alexie in 2002, explores themes of Indian identity, cultural involvement vs. blood quantum, living on the reservation or off it, and other issues around what makes someone a "real Indian." The title refers to the protagonist's choice to leave the reservation and make his living performing for predominantly white audiences. Much of the dialogue was improvised, based on real events in the actors' lives.

Style and themes

Alexie's poetry, short stories and novels explore themes of despair, poverty, violence, and alcoholism in the lives of Native American people living on and off the reservation. Although exploring grim subjects, the works are leavened by wit and humor.

According to Sarah A. Quirk from the Dictionary of Library Biography, Alexie asks three questions across all of his works:

- What does it mean to live as an Indian in this time?*
- What does it mean to be an Indian man?*
- What does it mean to live on an Indian reservation?*

The protagonists in most of his literary works exhibit a constant struggle with themselves and their own sense of powerlessness in white American society.

Alexie’s writings "blends elements of popular culture, Indian spirituality, and the drudgery of poverty-ridden reservation life to create his characters and the world they inhabit," according to Quirk. His work is laced with often startling humor.

Personal

In 2005, Alexie became a founding board member of Longhouse Media, a non-profit organization that teaches filmmaking skills to Native American youth. It holds to the

belief that media can be used for both cultural expression and social change.

Alexie is married to Diane Tomhave, who is of Hidatsa, Ho-Chunk and Potawatomi heritage. They live in Seattle with their two sons. (*Adapted from Wikipoedia. Retrieved 1/31/2016.*)

Book Reviews

What would we do without Sherman Alexie? Having a long, abiding fascination with Native America, I've always reached for his books. More than any other writer, he has given me an understanding of contemporary Amerindian life.... Now we have his latest book, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me: a Memoir*. I have to say: reading it was painful. There is much suffering — mental illness, sexual abuse, violent deaths, bullying, and alcoholism — within Sherman's family and on the Spokane Indian Reservation where he grew up. Largely this book tackles his rather maddening relationship with his mother and was written after she passed away in 2015. [READ MORE](#)

Keddy Ann Outlaw - LitLovers

The overwhelming takeaway from Mr. Alexie's memoir is triumph, that of one writer's ability to overcome hardscrabble roots, medical bad luck and generations of systemic racism — all through an uncommon command of language and metaphor.

James Yeh - New York Times Book Review

These pages are scored by resentment, hurt, guilt, anger, fear, but they are also full of gratitude, admiration, and tenderness.

Priscilla Gillman - Boston Globe

[A] marvel of emotional transparency, a story told with the fewest possible filters by a writer grieving the loss of a complicated mother.... [His lines of poetry] successfully convey the inevitable contradictions that beguile and beleaguer anyone who has ever tried to write honestly about someone they hoped to love, someone they hoped would love them.

Beth Kephart - Chicago Tribune

If candor is Alexie's superpower, accuracy might be his nemesis.... Throughout, Alexie is courageous and unflinching, delivering a worthy and honest eulogy by showing us his mother and himself in full, everything spectacular and everything scarred.

Michael Kleber-Diggs - Minneapolis Star Tribune

He's compulsively readable, a literary writer with the guts of a stand-up comedian.

Jim Higgins - Milwaukee Sentinel Journal

Everything you love about Alexie's writing is here: he still manages to find honest human comedy in the darkness of America's genocidal past and our deeply racist present.... His personality is large and, as he survives each passing trial, it's only getting larger; from his adoring audience's vantage point, Alexie is now a giant.

Paul Constant - Seattle Review of Books

The text is rambling, digressive, and sometimes baggy, with dozens of his poems sprinkled in; it wanders among lucid, conversational prose, bawdy comic turns, and lyrical, incantatory verse. This is a fine homage to the vexed process of growing up,

Publishers Weekly

(Starred review.) [M]emories of a difficult childhood.... Highly recommended for all readers. Alexie's portrayals of family relationships, identity, and grief have the universality of great literature. —Nicholas Graham, Univ. of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

Library Journal

(Starred review.) Alexie is a consummate, unnerving and funny storyteller...pouring himself into every molten word. Courageous, anguished, grateful, and hilarious, this is an enlightening and resounding eulogy and self-portrait.... [A]ll will be reaching for this confiding and concussive memoir.

Booklist

Written in his familiar breezy, conversational, and aphoristic style, the book makes even the darkest personal experiences uplifting and bearable with the author's wit, sarcasm, and humor.... [A] powerful, brutally honest memoir about a mother and the son who loved her.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, please use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for You Don't Have to Say You Love Me ... then take off on your own:

1. In writing this memoir, Sherman Alexie told his sister that there would be a lot of blank spaces. "But I like the blank spaces." What do you think he means — why does he like blank spaces? What might they signify for him?

2. *Follow-up to Question 1*: Alexie also says, "This book is a series of circles, sacred and profane." Again, what do you think he means? What are the circles — and which are sacred and which profane?

3, Alexie takes an entire book, some 400 pages, to talk about his mother. So ... in less than 400 pages ... how would *you* describe Lillian? Talk about those traits that are both admirable and not so admirable, or just plain awful. Does she generate sympathy? Did your feelings toward her change during the course of reading the memoir?

4. *Follow-up to Questions 3*: How did the process of writing this memoir — and grappling with some memories he says are so painful he almost did not include them — affect Alexie's understanding of his mother? Does he find peace by the end? If so, in what way?

5. At times Alexie moves the book's focus away from Lillian and back to his own childhood: his medical emergencies, high school years, mental health problems. Talk about those years. What did you find particularly moving or remarkable about his background?

6. Reviewers make much of the humor in *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me*. Did it make you laugh as you read it? What in particular did you find funny.

7. What is the significance of the book's cover photo?

8. The book includes 160 poems. Do you have a favorite? Do you find that the poems illuminate the narrative? If so in what way? Or do you find the poetry distracting? Consider the times that the author broke out of a poem into prose, then back into poetry again. Is there anything in particular that seems to prompt the changes from one mode to the other?

9. What have you learned about life on an Indian Reservation? What insights have you gleaned from this memoir into Native American culture? Did anything especially surprise you, impress you, delight you, anger you, or sadden you?

(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)

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